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ABSTRACT

Collaborative work fits the cognitive learning style of most college students, and provides opportunities for students to learn how to become responsible and valuable members of groups. A collaborative research paper was used in an undergraduate survey course called Introduction to Drama. In groups of four, students wrote a paper discussing a play from the class reading list in terms of how they would produce that play. The assignment met the important criteria for effective group learning: (1) the duration was long enough (4 weeks) for effective group cohesion to occur; (2) there was time for leadership to emerge and negotiations of authority; (3) different types of tasks were involved; (4) groups could build upon individual expertise; and (5) students evaluated themselves as well as other group members, and these evaluations were used in determining grades. Student response was overwhelmingly positive. The assignment was successful because it gave students the opportunity to work together toward a common goal and learn from each other. This approach provides an alternative to the typical research paper written in isolation. (An appendix contains a handout with instructions for the collaborative term paper assignment.) (SR)

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Communities and Collaboration: An Alternative Research Assignment for Literature Courses

Within the last five to ten years, many researchers in composition have begun to explore the relationship between cognitive learning styles and writing. As a result, in several books and articles we find suggestions of ways to integrate collaborative learning techniques into writing courses, particularly in technical writing, business writing and, most recently, in freshman composition courses. Today, after a few, brief comments about the value of group learning, I will describe how I successfully used a collaborative term paper assignment in Introduction to Drama, an undergraduate survey course, and suggest ways this assignment could be adapted for other courses.

In his book People Types and Tiger Stripes, a Practical Guide to Learning Styles, Gordon Lawrence focuses on the implications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, an instrument I suppose is familiar to most of us, so I won't describe it here. Basically, what Lawrence indicates is that most of today's college teachers tend to be introverted, looking inward for resources and cues, having a limited number of interests which are pursued deeply, being reflective and attending to things that stimulate the imagination. However, only 30% of today's students fall into this category; at least 70% are the direct opposite. That is, they are linear learners with strong need for structure, who like direct experience, including group projects and practical tests.

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In other words, while we (teachers) may look inward and use our imagination to find meaning, our students look outward and find meaning through group sharing. One style is not "better" than the other, and we certainly don't want to make gross categorical distinctions. My point is that we need to be sensitive to this difference in learning style preferences in the ways we construct assignments and conduct classes so that this clash is minimized.

Collaborative or group work, then, fits the learning style preference of most of our students. In fact, whether or not we introverts feel comfortable, much of our work involves some sort of group. Just think for a moment of how many committees you are involved with--at school, at church, in the community. How often do you consult with others? How frequently does the outcome of your work or project depend upon another person? My point is that we as adults are part of a constantly shifting community or communities--and we need to provide opportunities for our students to learn how to become responsible and valuable members of groups. Caryl Sills says in her article, "Interactive Learning in the Composition Classroom," that "cooperative learning is ... a deliberate attempt to take advantage of differing perspectives through the interaction of individuals and their ideas in a reciprocal or alternating action" (21). Collaborative learning is dependent upon positive interaction among group members as they work towards a common goal: "students put into groups are only students grouped and are not collaborators, unless a task

that demands consensual learning unifies the group activity" (Weiner 55).

I'll not elaborate more fully here on the value of collaborative learning. Suffice it to say that more and more instructors in more and more departments are making use of the research on group learning. Such activities are increasingly frequent in composition courses and technical writing courses. They also can be used effectively and successfully in literature courses as we emphasize writing to learn as opposed to learning to write. The assignment I discuss here illustrates a way of integrating collaborative learning with the writing of a research project in my general education Introduction to Drama course at Mankato State University. Typically, not all of the thirty-five students enrolled in this course have met their freshman composition requirements, and most are not English or Theatre majors.

The purpose of each paper, written by a group of four students, was to discuss a play from our reading list in terms of how they would produce that play; in other words, they were to transfer the playscript to the stage. Prior to this assignment, each of the students had written a paper interpreting a specific aspect of a play--a typical undergraduate task. They had also had opportunities to work with other class members in pairs and in small groups. And this is an important point--they had some interaction with at least a few other class members before deciding upon their group for this project.

Also, at the very beginning of the quarter, while going over the course syllabus, I spent quite some time describing this particular project, and I occasionally reminded them of it. The paper was weighted 25% of their final course grade, so I wanted them to choose group members they thought were congenial as well as good students (though I never offered any guidance on this point). While a few students had been part of group projects or papers in other courses, none had collaboratively written a paper on a literary text before participating in this assignment. Therefore, as you can see from the handout, my instructions were fairly specific while allowing for individual flexibility.

[See copy of handout following]

The assignment met the important criteria for effective group learning:

(1) the **duration** was long enough (4 weeks) for effective group cohesion to occur;

(2) there was time for **leadership** to emerge and for negotiation of authority;

(3) assignment involved **types of tasks** (instructions indicated a possible breakdown of labor), including research, writing, typing, artwork;

(4) group members could build upon **individual expertise**;

(5) there was opportunity for **student evaluation** of self as well as other group members, and I used their individual evaluations in determining the grades. Individually--and outside of the classroom--they filled out a confidential evaluation form on

participation by all members of the group. I used their comments and my own observations in assigning the individual portion of the research paper grade.

Here is just a brief description (taken from their papers) of the innovative approaches which two student groups took in staging The Misanthrope by Moliere:

One group decided to place their play, retitled "Rebel Against Conformity," in a typical American drive-in of the 1950s. Thus, the set and the costumes were of the fifties era, although the actors would continue to speak in couplets, as in Moliere's play. Their rationale for this change was to demonstrate that the hypocrisy and shallowness of 16th century French society was still alive in the American '50s. Another important similarity, they said, "is the fact that while the French had the salon, the fifties had their own institution of social gathering, the typical drive-in." The fifties was also very fashion-oriented. Continuing to use couplets, they felt, would reinforce this similarity. Characters: Alceste is the rebel, wearing black leather jacket over a white t-shirt, black denim jeans and black loafers (a la James Dean). Celimene, the new girl in town, wears a light pink and puffy skirt.

Comments from the evaluative questionnaire which each student completed were overwhelmingly positive. Here is just a brief sample:

"It [the assignment] was a difficult thing to do, but it was a growing experience. . . . I think students need more of these types of projects. You learn more than just about Drama."

"It was something worth doing. Working with others gets you motivated to do a good job; the others won't let you get by without doing your share of work."

"[You] can't procrastinate. Must do you work on time or 3 other people get pulled down with you. (I procrastinate)."

About a year after doing this assignment for the first time, I mentioned to one of the students in that section of the course that I was writing a paper about their collaborative paper assignment. Her immediate response was to smile and say that it was one of the best things she'd done all year. The effects and learning experience last longer than the end of the course.

I believe this assignment was successful for the students because

(1) It gives students the opportunity to work with other students informally, to share ideas and to learn from each other.

(2) It provides an alternative to the typical research paper which is prepared and written in isolation.

(3) Students learn to share responsibility and to work together toward a common goal.

(4) The assignment encourages students to look beyond the words written on the paper as they experience elements of drama not normally covered in a survey literature course.

In addition, the assignment was fun and interesting for me because it gave me an opportunity to work with students in their small groups and because their papers--much more creative than I had anticipated--were fun and interesting to read.

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COLLABORATIVE TERM PAPER - Introduction to Drama 112

The purpose of the term paper is to discuss a play from the reading list in terms of how you would produce that play. In other words, your main concern is to explain to your reader (another student in the class) how you would take the play script, which we all have read, and interpret it on stage. In most productions, three people are particularly significant: the playwright, the original author (as in the case of Arthur Miller) or the person who is adapting the original script; the producer, who generally is responsible for financing and technical arrangements (publicity and so on); and the director, who works with the actors and technicians (stage designer and costumer). In this paper, you will probably find yourself in the director's role.

In your discussions, you will need to consider the following elements of a production (Note: these are not in any priority order):

SET DESIGN - In some plays (such as Antigone) we are given very little description of setting or stage directions. In others (Death of a Salesman, for instance) we are given more elaborate stage directions. However, even in such cases, the director and producer of each production must decide how closely they wish to adhere to those directions.

You need to consider the type of stage you will use: an open stage, such as Greek theatre or Shakespeare's Globe Theatre; an arena (or theatre-in-the-round stage); or a proscenium stage. You must decide (1) in what time period your production is to be set, (2) how elaborate your set will be (this may be determined by budget limitations), (3) the significance of the setting as compared to the action of the play. In this section of your paper, you will describe what your set will look like and your reasoning. (Description may be accompanied by drawings.) Rationale for any deviation from stage directions must be given.

COSTUMES - The ultimate purpose of costume design is to aid understanding and interpretation of the play. Costuming should probably be decided in conjunction with the stage design. Time period is, of course, an important statement of your interpretation of the theme of the play and the characters. (For example, when Nora changes clothes in Act III, what type and color of dress would help the audience to understand that she has changed drastically from Act I?) Also consider the relative importance of costumes to setting. For example, you could decide to put your production money in costuming, where rather elaborate costumes are used with a relatively bare stage. (Again, your description may be accompanied by pictures or sketches. Photocopies from books are acceptable--don't forget to document.)

ACTORS - Think of types of actors/actresses you would cast. You may mention specific people or give physical descriptions. You need to base your decision on descriptions given in the play's directions (if any) and/or characters' dialogue or actions. (For example, in A Midsummer Night's Dream, we're told that Hermia is dark and short whereas Helena is fair and taller.) If you decide to deviate from a standard interpretation or description, defend your choices.

Paper format - 10-12 pages, double-spaced, using MLA documentation. In addition to citations from the text, you must use at least three critical sources. These sources may pertain to interpretation of the play and to production considerations. Topic/Thesis statement must be approved by me by November 8. Draft is due on November 15 for a workshop. Final paper is due November 20.

Paper will be written by a three-person group. As a group, you will decide how to divide up the work--the research, the writing, the typing, the illustrations (if any). I will not make individual assignments, though I am available for consultation (by the whole group or by an individual representing the group). Make an appointment with me.

Final grade will be determined as follows using the grading criteria attached to the syllabus: EAch term paper will receive a grade, which is the group grade. Each individual in the group will receive a grade, which may be different from the group grade. The individual grade will be determined by input from other group members and my personal observations. (Note: It is advisable that group members keep track of who does what in the preparation of the term paper) For determination of the final course grade, see the syllabus.

Why the collaborative approach to a research paper assignment?
- It gives students the opportunity to work with other students informally, to share ideas and to learn from each other.
- It provides an alternative to the typical research paper which is prepared and written in isolation.
- The assignment encourages students to look beyond the words written on the paper as they experience elements of drama not normally covered in a survey literature course.
- Students learn to share responsibility and to work together toward a common goal.